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ABSTRACT

The implementation and continuing growth of a volunteer youth/adult match-up service, Cal-Pal, being provided in seven rural communities are described in this article. School social workers in these areas can collaborate with other school-based personnel and community leaders to make such a service available. A major benefit of the program is the growing number of youth who are able to enjoy the opportunity of another friendship with a responsible adult outside the family. The steps described in building this service program can be used in other communities that are interested in developing a volunteer youth and adult pal program. Essential to the effectiveness of Cal-Pal is community consensus between youth, parents, school and non-school leaders that a need exists for an individual friendship program. Beyond being aware of the need, a match-up program at the county level requires the commitment of many people who make their time and talent available to Cal-Pal service. Rural school social workers, by training and experience, are able to play a part in building interdisciplinary cooperation, assessing community needs, facilitating teamwork in group planning, and supporting the ongoing goals of the developing community service program. (RJM)

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CAL-PAL:
A COUNTY-WIDE VOLUNTEER SERVICE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the implementation and continuing growth of a volunteer youth/adult match-up service being provided in seven rural communities. School social workers in these areas can collaborate with other school based personnel and community leaders to make such a service available. A major benefit of the program is a growing number of youth who are able to enjoy the opportunity of another friendship with a responsible adult outside the family. The steps described in building this service program can be used in other communities that are interested in developing a volunteer youth and adult pal program.

One model of intervention that school social workers can use to help students at risk is facilitating the development of new services in the community. Staudt (1987), for example, described the development of a "kinship" program in a rural Iowa school for children from single parent families who had a need for a friend or an additional adult role model. Indeed, school personnel and community leaders can recognize a need to develop new resources in a rural community and form a collaborative partnership to respond to those needs. The formation, growth and benefits of a program matching

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youth from single parent family homes with volunteer adults using an interdisciplinary approach is described.

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During the fall of 1989, the authors became aware of a student population that needed help with social-emotional problems, academic problems and minor health concerns. Many appeared to have additional concerns which went beyond the scope of the short-term individualized services that were being provided. These youths were often from homes in which there was a single parent and could benefit from a trusting, longer-term relationship with an adult outside the school setting. Organized youth services such as YMCA or Big Brothers/Big Sisters did not exist in this rural county. With the 19,000 residents and 2,500 students in this county living on farms or in several small communities, the scattered population and lack of funding made affiliation to any county or national special service program impractical; yet, the need still existed.

Wallerstein (1985) states that children from divorced families are more likely to feel overburdened by extra responsibilities and to feel a greater sense of loneliness and vulnerability. The unfulfilled social-emotional needs of these youths could lead to a pattern of at-risk behaviors. The National Commission on Children (1991) reported that single parents are more likely than parents from "traditional families" to have children who are at risk for dropping out of school, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, mental illness and juvenile delinquency. Rural areas have the same general pattern of increasing divorce rates and increasing at-risk problems. In 1970, for example, 1 family in

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15 was headed by a single parent in Calhoun County in Northwest Iowa; however, in 1990, 1 family in 7 was a single parent family (U.S. Bureau of Census). Providing a service program to these children in Calhoun County was complicated by the fact that there were seven school districts and the towns are 12 to 15 miles apart.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The collaborative experience in the development of a new county-wide service program--and support of the program once it began functioning--has been one of expanding involvement. Benefits have resulted from each stage of the increasing commitment to the goals of the Calhoun County Pal (Cal-Pal) match-up service program. As noted by Rothman (1979), organizational goals change from specific task-oriented steps to process-oriented goals involving a continuation of a level of maintenance and support. The following stages were utilized in the development of the Cal-Pal program:

1. exploratory stage--formation of informational meetings with school support personnel;
2. expanded planning stage--committee meetings with school and community leaders in order to start up a county-wide service delivery program; and
3. program growth stage--advisory support during the initial stage of growth of the official community sponsored Cal-Pal program.

EXPLORATORY STAGE

An important objective of the initial exploratory meeting was to determine which school helping

professionals would be willing to be actively involved in developing services. The authors needed active support from schools throughout the area if consensus for a county-wide program were to be reached.

Invitations and meeting agenda information aimed at exploring the need and the interest in developing a youth/adult match-up program initially were sent in the fall of 1989 to school counselors, school nurses, Area Education Agency team personnel and the county social service worker. The coordinator of a YMCA based service program from an adjoining county was asked to be the guest speaker, and a centrally located meeting place in the county was selected. The school social worker traveled from school to school and spoke to each of the school counselors about how the program could be useful in their school.

After several meetings, representatives from six community schools within the county expressed interest in developing a program of special services for the youth. The school counselors and school nurses communicated these initial plans for exploring the development of a new service program to their school principals and superintendents.

COMMUNITY PLANNING STAGE

Each of the core members in the exploratory group invited non-school volunteers to become part of the planning effort, thereby increasing the number of participants to 10-12. The tasks of the planning committee were (1) to select a program model and develop an organizational structure for a community based match-up service program; (2) to investigate liability obligations of voluntary organizations; (3) to find a funding source to help pay for

development; and (4) to create a procedural manual for board members and coordinators in different communities.

Committee members felt there would be advantages to developing a new independently-run service program, rather than attempting to join an already existing organization. Developing a new program would be likely to result in more participation by people who saw the program as a community service autonomous within the county. Also, program monitoring for responsible and beneficial match-ups was less complicated to accomplish by retaining community ownership of the program.

The planning committee was then ready to address organizational issues of running an independent program such as recruitment, coordinator and board roles, and collaboration with referral sources (school social workers, counselors, nurses and others). The committee decided that each school district would represent a distinct community and that each community would benefit most by having their own match-up coordinator. The responsibilities of the community coordinators would be to recruit adult volunteers and to arrange and to oversee match-ups between volunteers. The role of the Cal-Pal Board was to govern the entire Cal-Pal program throughout the participating communities, to make financial decisions and to provide support to coordinators. An advisory committee was established to provide another layer of support to the board, coordinators and youth.

The second issue examined by the planning committee was liability insurance. The cost of liability insurance was likely to be a serious obstacle to establishing a voluntary youth/adult Pal program in the county. The county attorney advised that individual liability insurance would not be needed for this type of voluntary program. Liability insurance was not purchased; however, a statement was included in the parent permission form for youth/adult Pal

match-ups that the Cal-Pal program did not have insurance coverage.

The third issue of the planning committee was fund raising. In February 1990, the Cal-Pal committee learned that Cal-Pal would be eligible to apply for a grant from the Iowa Department of Public Health, Division of Substance Abuse, as a preventative service program. The planning committee decided to apply for start-up funding costs for implementing Cal-Pal programs in five different communities. In March 1990, the coordinators from three communities received notice that they had been awarded community grants--a total grant award of $1,500.

The final issue faced by the planning committee was the development of a procedure manual. The authors and planning subcommittee reviewed other rural and urban match-up program procedures and wrote a procedural manual. Copies of the procedural manual were made for distribution to board members and coordinators once the program officially started.

After these four planning committee goals were met, a public meeting was held in April 1990. This officially marked the beginning of the Cal-Pal organization and gave public recognition to the volunteer committee. One of the specific goals of the first Cal-Pal meeting was to bring together board members, coordinators, adult volunteers, single parents and other interested persons from all of the communities involved. There were over 20 people at the first official Cal-Pal meeting. County newspapers reported the event, photographed the planning committee and published articles.

PROGRAM GROWTH

During the first year of the program, two of the

authors were involved in increasing the organizational base of Cal-Pal board members and area coordinators, increasing participation in the youth/adult match-up program and building a positive attitude among volunteers and the community regarding the worth of the program.

Increasing the organizational base: The authors collaborated with the planning committee in selecting board members who were well known and well respected for their community involvement. The board members who were chosen used their range of associations and friendships to enlist additional board members and coordinators. The authors were also able to directly recruit board members and coordinators by contacting people who were already working with children in agencies and organizations in the county.

Increasing youth/adult Cal-Pal match-ups: The Cal-Pal Board set up a booth at the July 1990 county fair to publicize the program. A second means of publicizing the program and to increase match-ups was through assistance in writing newspaper and school newsletter articles. A third means was short talks given by members of the board and advisory group to various religious and community organizations. The school social worker and the school nurse were also able to help distribute coupons for free entertainment activities to various communities as they went to the schools throughout the county. Most importantly, they worked closely with the school counselor and the teachers in the schools to promote youth awareness of the program and to facilitate application procedures for youth who were interested in participating in the service.

Developing a positive attitude among volunteers and the community: The Cal-Pals Board had a party at a multi-recreational facility in March 1991. The advisory group worked with the board members and coordinators in contacting Cal-Pal match-up volunteers, making food preparations and publicizing the

event. Over 30 Cal-Pal members and their families attended this weekend recreational evening. The enthusiasm and energy of the group were evident. Everyone agreed they would like to have another Cal-Pal event--and 1 youth suggested having another group party the very next day.

As the Cal-Pal program nears the end of its second year of growth, the authors have continued to become more involved in supportive tasks for the maintenance of the organization, for example, involvement in funding concerns and teaching procedures for match-ups. Direct recruitment has lessened as other volunteers in the Cal-Pal program have become more experienced in those activities. Local school support professionals increasingly have concentrated on balancing time commitments, maintaining a focus on the limited service mission of the program and being sensitive to the needs of volunteers who generously agree to make the program one that truly benefits the children it is meant to serve.

SUMMARY OF BENEFITS

Within a year after the first Cal-Pal Board Meeting, all board member positions were filled. Cal-Pal also expanded to include an additional area in an adjoining county. Thus, there are now seven board members representing different communities, plus one overall board member representative. In addition, by July 1991, there were a total of 10 coordinators and co-coordinators providing leadership in the different community sites. During the first year of the program's existence, a total of 25 match-ups were completed. Sixteen of the first year match-ups continue. Most of the discontinued match-ups at the end of the first year were due to families moving away or because of health problems.

By February 1992, the Cal-Pal program grew to a total of 27 active match-ups. Because of widespread interest by both youth and adult pals, there have been two additional group activities since the first party in March 1991. At the most recent Cal-Pal party, over 60 volunteers and families of Cal-Pal adult volunteers participated in the activities. The board has been supportive of new ideas, such as a dinner to honor adult Cal-Pal volunteers in February 1992. The Cal-Pal program continues to grow at an average rate of 1 or 2 new match-ups each month.

The most important change resulting from the creation of the community Cal-Pal program is the participation of youth and caring adults in a responsible and flexible new relationship. Awareness of the school social work role has increased with the advent of group events and additional match-ups. The structure of the Cal-Pal organization promotes procedures for appropriate match-ups and funding of enjoyable recreational activities for the matched pals and for the organization's group activities. It also provides a channel of communication between parents, adult volunteers, children and the coordinators. The new service network for referrals is working effectively, many community members are involved and it appears likely that this match-up program will continue for a long time.

CONCLUSION

Essential to the effectiveness of Cal-Pal is community consensus between youth, parents, school and non-school leaders that a need exists for an individual friendship program. Beyond being aware of the need, a match-up program at the county level requires the commitment of many people who make

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their time and talent available to Cal-Pal service. Rural school social workers, by training and experience, are able to play a part in building interdisciplinary cooperation assessing community needs, facilitating teamwork in group planning and supporting the ongoing goals of the developing community service program.

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